

BELIEF

By a Hair

In Tractate Nazir, the Talmud teaches us about beauty, transcendence, and other human frailties

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HEN I WAS 16 YEARS OLD, MY HAIR STARTED TURNING WHITE. I AM not entirely sure when I found my first white hair, but I know the insecurity, anxiety, and ruminations about my slowly deteriorating hair lasted for over a decade. Every mirror became my own personal *Picture of Dorian Gray*. While other teens were preoccupied with their professional future or their romantic futures, my future was colored by my hair. I was 16 and I was already fully immersed in a midlife crisis. And it was this preoccupation with my hair that made Tractate Nazir such a moving and deeply personal learning experience.

A nazirite vow prohibits one from cutting their hair, drinking wine, and becoming contaminated by contact with the dead. But more so than any of the other prohibitions, the crowning definition of the nazir—a person who has taken this vow—is hair. The very word “nazir,” explains Rashi, is a crown. And throughout Tractate Nazir, I discovered how to find sanctity in my own hair.

Is it praiseworthy to be a nazir? Throughout the tractate there is an underlying ambiguity about whether or not the act of becoming a nazir should be encouraged. The Talmud cites a dispute about whether a nazir is consider a sinner. “How can a

nazir be called beautiful?” the Talmud asks. “It is a sin!” Why? Because Judaism generally does not look at asceticism favorably. Jews sanctify the physical world, we don’t abstain from it. Celibacy, constant fasting, self-flagellation are not the vehicles of Jewish piety.

And yet, the nazir is called holy. As uplifting as this world can potentially be, the Torah recognizes that we need a mechanism to extricate ourselves from the physicality of this world. So the act of nazir is one of inherent ambiguity—the pleasures of this world are meant to be enjoyed, but sometimes we need nazir in our lives to disentangle ourselves from the overwhelming allure of material gratification. In this sense, a nazir can be seen as a necessary concession, an in-case-of-emergency-break-glass, where in order to create the capacity to find holiness in this world, we sometimes must first leave this world. Like a semester abroad that helps you appreciate your hometown.

“Have you tried dyeing it?” my therapist asked. I was halfway through the 12th grade, I didn’t have a driver’s license yet, and all I could think about were the white hairs slowly cropping up on my head. At first, I tried plucking them out one by one. I soon learned that it takes a surprising amount of dexterity, like an open-heart surgeon, to coordinate the tweezer to an individual follicle of hair through a mirror. Plucking was not going to be a long-term solution. I empathized with the famed poet Yehuda Halevi, who wrote a Hebrew poem about his white hairs:

A white hair appeared, on my head, alone,
When plucked, it retorted, in mocking tone
“Me you defeated, but my platoon?
What’s your plan, ’cause they’re coming soon?!”

I needed a plan, but hair dye didn’t feel like the right one. Much like the nazir, it felt like an unnecessary concession. Why did this even bother me so much?

Perhaps, if I had more character or better values, the foreboding sense that I was deteriorating would be forgotten. Hair dye would cover up the problem, I wanted to sanctify it.

“No,” I told my therapist, “I don’t want to try dyeing it.”

Instead, I thought of Shimon HaTzadik, the great Talmudic rabbi. Rebbe Shimon, the Talmud recounts, did not approve of the nazirite vow. Most, he felt, regretted their act of piety. Their sacrifices were not sincere. So Rebbe Shimon did not feel comfortable eating from their sacrificial offerings. Except for one nazir. Once Rebbe Shimon bumped into a nazir with beautiful eyes, and a glowing countenance, with long flowing curly hair. “My son,” Rebbe Shimon asked, “why did you decide to become a nazir?” At the end of the nazir ritual, the nazir must shave his entire head. What possessed this individual, Rebbe Shimon wondered, to undergo such a dramatic act, thereby destroying his beautiful hair? The mysterious man explained:

I was a shepherd for my father in my town, and I went to draw water from the spring, and I looked at my reflection in the water. And my evil inclination quickly rose against me and sought to drive me from the world. I said to my evil inclination: Empty one! For what reason are you proud in a world that is not yours, as your end is to be maggots and worms when you die. I swear by the Temple service that I will become a nazirite and shave you for the sake of Heaven.

Moved by his sincerity, Rebbe Shimon kissed him on the head and said, “May there be more nazirites like you among the Jewish people!”

This passage made me reflect on my own troubles. I, too, was haunted by my reflection. But not because of its beauty, but because what I saw felt so ugly. The very word for reflection used in this Talmudic passage, בבוואה, can also mean shadow. And that’s what I saw in the mirror. I saw the shadow of myself, my decrepit self, my lifeless hair, my decaying vitality. My reflection didn’t inspire

pride, it evoked sadness. I was an inverted nazir. The ideal nazir escapes the pride of beauty, I wanted to escape my withering self. So, I caved and decided to dye my hair. And here's the thing no one tells you about dyeing your hair: So much can go wrong. One stray stream of hair dye will leave a shadowed streak straight down your forehead to your chin like you've been crying brown tears.

I wished I didn't want to, but I started dyeing my hair in yeshiva. And yeshiva is pretty much the worst place to start dyeing your hair. First of all, you need to buy the hair dye. That was its own ordeal. No 19-year-old wants to be spotted at CVS with a shopping cart full of Grecian Formula for Men. I'm pretty sure I would have sooner shoplifted them rather than see somebody I knew. So, I would go to these remote CVS locations where I could be safe with my anonymous shame.

Next, you need to figure out how and when you are going to apply the hair dye. Yeshivas, like most college dorms, don't have private bathrooms. There's a public sink area, which divides the toilets from the showers. I would stay up late, after everyone else was already asleep, and quietly and clandestinely apply the hair formula inside one of the bathroom stalls, peeking out to see in the mirrors every few minutes to ensure I didn't have a streak of dye running down my forehead. The hair dye has to remain in your hair for about 20 minutes, I think. That's a long 20 minutes sequestered in a bathroom stall. And then I would briskly walk from the bathroom stalls, past the sinks, into the shower to wash it all out. It felt like a mile-long walk. But when I was done, I wouldn't have to be haunted by the shadow of my reflection.

I learned Tractate Nazir for the first time around 10 years ago. There is one passage that struck me. The Talmud wants to know if you can become a nazir by invoking the death of Moses. Does saying "like Moses on the seventh of Adar," the traditional date for the death of Moses, make one a nazir?

Wait, what?! Why would the death of Moses make someone into a nazir? Moses was the greatest of prophets, he wasn't even a nazir. Tosafos suggests maybe this is how the Jewish people coped following the passing of their beloved leader. As if becoming a nazir is a normal way to mourn. When I first learned this, I and my *chavruta* at the time, Alon Amar, looked around to see if we could find a more incisive explanation. We couldn't. So I sat with this question for a decade. Until it came time to learn Tractate Nazir with Daf Yomi. And part of the beauty of Daf Yomi is that it feels like you're learning together alongside the rest of the Jewish people. Everyone is on the same page. *Klal Yisroel* was now my *chavruta*. So I phoned a friend, Rabbi Pinny Gross of Baltimore, who after thinking about the question for a day or two gave me an astounding answer.

“Look at the Torah's retelling of the death of Moses,” Rabbi Gross explained. There is an anomaly in the way the Torah describes Moses' burial. *And there died Moses, the Torah writes* in its closing chapter, *and he buried him in the valley of the land of Moab*. So, who exactly buried Moses? The Torah is unclear. Rashi cites two explanations. The first is that God buried Moses. Rashi's second explanation, however, is that Moses buried himself. “And he buried him,” both he and him refer to Moses. It's a strange formulation that Rashi supports with only one other passage in the Torah that refers to someone as both a subject and object in a sentence. You guessed it: the nazir.

“On the day that the term as nazirite is completed,” the Torah writes, “the person shall be brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.” The person shall be brought, meaning the nazir should bring himself—like Moses' burial, the nazir relates to himself in third person. And this subtle grammatic twist gets to the heart of what being a nazir is all about.

The nazir, explains Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843-1926), relates to himself in third person. Quashed in the throes of his own physicality, the nazir learns to look at himself, at his image, at his reflection, in third person—not as a reflection of his essential self but the image of another. Like Moses, who confronted the presence of God face-to-face, discarding whatever tethered him to his own physicality, the

nazir relinquishes those ties of beauty, appearance, and indulgence that keep most of us bound to this world in the hope of some glimpse of transcendence. When Moses died, the Jewish people tried to become the closest thing to his legacy: They became nazirites.

I soon grew tired of hair dye. I was in my early 20s and I was starting to date. Hair dye felt like a cheap coat of paint covering up more essential issues I had with myself. I was sick of hiding from my reflection and wanted to learn to embrace it. More therapy, meditation. I read a book, *Turning White*, about a newscaster's struggle with vitiligo, a skin disease that creates splotches of white. I don't remember when I finally stopped ruminating about my hair—sometimes I still do—but eventually the perpetual shouts of ugliness in my head became quieter. I stopped looking in the mirror. I found other ways, aside from youth, to distinguish myself. I distracted myself from reminders of my ephemerality and grasped tighter to those things in my life that were eternal. I stepped away from the image of self to discover a more enduring sense of self. I no longer had to live as an inverted nazir, my hair—like my ears, or nose, or weird thumbs—just became another part of me.

The holiness of the nazir is described in future tense. He *will* be holy, the Torah explains. Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1530-72) explains that the holiness of the nazir is only fully realized once the term of the nazirite is completed. Holiness is not found by escaping your self but by embracing it. The otherworldliness of Moses or of the nazirite, however admirable, is not a sustainable path. True holiness is found after we rejoin the world and learn to sanctify it. Whatever ugliness we may find in this world, whatever imperfections we may see in our reflections, whatever flaws that gnaw our image, are not meant to be escaped—they need to be sanctified. We can find holiness in the mirror if we only develop the courage to step before it. And what we find there can become beautiful.

הדרן עלך מסכת נזיר והדרן עלן

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